INTERVIEW

ASK Talks with W. Scott Cameron

Scott Cameron is the Capital Systems Manager for the Food & Beverage Global Business Unit of Procter & Gamble, and has been managing capital projects and mentoring other project managers for the past 20 years at Procter & Gamble within its Beauty Care, Health Care, Food & Beverage, and Fabric & Home Care Businesses. Scott also has been an ASK feature writer since Volume One. Here at ASK we consider Scott a dear friend, a generous colleague, and a great storyteller. We are all too happy to provide a venue for his wit and wisdom. He and his family live in Cincinnati, Ohio.

ASK: Tell me about a project that has had an enduring impact on you?

Cameron: The project I look back on with probably the most pride was my first major project. It was a multi-site, five-plant project wherein the first plant start-up was 18 weeks after funding and the fifth startup date was 26 weeks after funding. Only two of the sites were identified at the time we received funding, and none of the process and packing equipment had been ordered. Two things about this project had a huge impact on me. First, it gave me the courage to be accountable for the decisions I made, as there was no time to second-guess myself. Secondly, it taught me that every day of a project's life is important and you need to get the most out of each day.

ASK: You met the schedule?

> "The project manager must motivate the team based on the project's unique challenges, the team members' experience level, and the project schedule."

Cameron: We did. I remember sitting in a hotel room with a pad of paper and drawing up the project's critical path schedule and deciding what things had to be done and the milestone completion dates the project team had to meet. I then called my project manager-mentor and reviewed my thought process and assumptions. He listened to my plan, questioned me about it, and said, "If you can meet all your milestone dates, you can make your schedule." He also told me that meeting this challenge was no easy feat but could be done with some major "mountain moving."

ASK: It is interesting to hear you did it with a pencil and paper, especially for something that I imagine was awfully complex. Do you ever use computer programs, like Microsoft Project, to do your scheduling?

Cameron: A lot of times when I talk to people about doing schedules, they ask me what scheduling program I use. To be quite honest, I use a pencil and paper

ASK Magazine By practitioners for practitioners

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most of the time to sketch out the critical path as I see it, which in an electronic age probably says I'm an old fogy. The schedule is just a tool to align the project team to what they have to do by when in order to be successful. How you prepare or draw the schedule is more a philosophical debate because there are many good software programs. The key is getting your project team members to be honest as to how long their work is going to take and how much time the schedule will allow them to accomplish their tasks. Whenever I put together an initial schedule I work right to left (start-up to today) versus left to right (today to startup date). When you ask people how long something is going to take, their response always results in the initial schedules being two to three times longer than the time you have. That's why I believe if it's a six-week or two-year schedule, every day matters and aligning the team to this fact early in the life of a project will help insure its success. When you start off on a two-year project, you tend to feel like nothing is restricting the schedule at that point, but those initial days are days which are hard to recover or very expensive to recover later in the project's life.

ASK: Is it different motivating a team when the schedule is six weeks as opposed to two years?

"Part of your job (as project manager)," says Scott Cameron, "is to figure out how to mold the team to meet the success criteria of the project."

Cameron: Each team takes on its own personality. The Project Manager must motivate the team based on the project's unique challenges, the team members' experience level, and the project schedule. With that said, I believe, it is far easier to motivate a team with a short schedule because people realize everyday is important and there isn't as much time for divergent thought processes. This is one of the things I find exciting about being a project manager. You never really have the same team, same schedule, or same project scope twice in a row. Each project team and their respective hierarchy have a different experience and knowledge base to manage. Part of your job is to figure out how to mold the team to meet the success criteria of the project.

ASK: Tell me about one of the more challenging experiences you've had trying to motivate a team.

> "If the hierarchy is not well informed, then you will have a problem regardless of how well your team is functioning. "

Cameron: I once worked on a project where I was "thrown in" at the last minute to replace the project manager who requested to be taken off the assignment. We had six weeks from when I arrived at the site to complete engineering, construction and start up the project. We had completed only 20% of the construction, and the remaining 80% was extremely complicated. I had to immediately step in and get everyone to start working together to meet this very aggressive, if not unattainable, schedule. To add to the challenge, the various functional personnel on the team hated one another. I sat down with each functional leader on a one-on-one basis and said, "Okay, so how do you view your situation and your role, and what is it going to take to get us to start-up 6 weeks from now?" It wasn't threatening, but it was like I had to say, "My job here is to lead us to start-up in six weeks. Are you with me?" The key in this case was getting people aligned in meeting the schedule and finding out what was motivating the team's dysfunctional behavior. They may not have liked the end date, they would tell me all the reasons why they couldn't achieve perfection, but once we were aligned they were able to start working together. In the end, we started up within 8 weeks instead of the 6 weeks.

ASK: One-on-one communication proved to be the magic formula?

Cameron: It wasn't exactly magic, but yes. The project manager is seen as the single point of contact, and I had to quickly get to know people on the team and what was motivating them. When you're the project manager you are going to spend a lot of time with these people. Best to understand what is making them "tick" early in the project's life. One thing I should add. You also have to under-

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stand the system you work in and how the components are supposed to work with one another. A long time ago I had a boss who said, "When I assign a project manager, I want to make sure she or he knows every way possible to defeat the system and the processes we have in place." The point being if you thoroughly understand the environment you work in, you can understand how each system will impact your project. Thus, you can help yourself see and eliminate future bottlenecks the team may encounter. In the first project I've talked about, I understood how the company's systems worked. I took apart my schedule and said here are the bottlenecks we will encounter, and then I took steps to eliminate them. That was a major reason why we met the schedule.

> "By the way, good project managers at any stage of their careers should be willing to be singed."

ASK: How can you tell when a team is really functioning well together?

Cameron: For one thing, there is a lot of good communication. You see people stopping each other in the hall, they are active, they are animated, they are resolving things, they are keeping you informed, but they are pretty much making most of the decisions on their own to meet the success criteria. They feel empowered and show it!

ASK: That must be nice. How then does your role as project manager change in that case?

Cameron: You spend more time with the hierarchy making sure their needs are being met and they are knowledgeable of the work their people are doing to make the project successful. You should also be insuring that the hierarchy is taking time to recognize their organization's good work. If the hierarchy is not well informed, then you will have a problem regardless of how well your team is functioning.

ASK: Is this like running interference for the team so upper management doesn't get in their hair?

Cameron: Sort of, but let's be careful here. There are times where you need to run interference because you want to keep the team focused, but most of the time the team needs to understand their hierarchy and their needs. You also need to give the project team a forum to "strut their stuff" for their bosses. You certainly don't want the team to think it is only the project manager who interfaces with hierarchy. I don't want my team members to get burned or crushed by their hierarchy in reviews, but I'm okay if they get "singed." So while I would agree at

times you need to shelter the project team, they have to learn their hierarchy is integral to the success of their projects and sometimes have different expectations than the project team may assume. Isolating the team from interfacing with hierarchy would be the worst thing I could do.

> "The last thing I want to do is clone "little Scotts" who can carry out my ideas about project management without thinking."

ASK: Describe a situation where somebody got singed, and how you knew it wasn't a serious burn.

Cameron: How about something that happened to me. Early in my engineering career, I was the technical engineer on a project. My boss and I had a disagreement on what technical scope should be installed. He had his position and I had mine. Since I was leading the hierarchical technical review, he allowed me the forum to present my case and he presented his. As the smoke began rising around me during my technical presentation, I learned a valuable lesson about the hierarchy. Luckily, my boss had a fire extinguisher handy. I just got singed and not burned.

ASK: What do people say to you after you let them get singed?

Cameron: Sometimes they come back and say I was right, or come back and say I was kind of right. They rarely come back and say I was wrong. By the way, good project managers at any stage of their careers should be willing to be singed. No one is immune to the fire. But if you've been doing this long enough, you understand that getting singed is necessary to your growth and to challenge the status quo.

ASK: I remember hearing you speak once at a conference about how rewarding it was for you to be a mentor to young project managers. What is it that you get out of mentoring?

Cameron: As I've gotten older, I've started to wonder, "Where are the next generation project managers going to come from?" I think about how I have grown throughout my career and can talk about the projects I've worked on, but when I get down to the root cause of my growth and development the most important factor has been the people who managed and coached me and let me get singed and challenged me. Individual managers had a profound impact on me. As I look back, I can see how this boss taught me how to write proposals. This mentor taught me financial aspects and cash flow of the company. This peer focused me on schedules. This one focused me on team dynamics. This one taught me how

to listen and not immediately react. It's a collection of people, and I feel its part of my job to instill these learnings to others as others invested in me.

ASK: How much of mentoring is just listening?

Cameron: A lot. Project managers don't have many avenues to vent their frustrations or brainstorm ideas to improve their projects because of the demands on their time. They can vent to spouses or loved ones, but that's usually not very healthy and, probably in the long run, somewhat destructive to their personal lives. They can vent to their bosses, but there is the risk their bosses will see them as weak and wonder, "Did I put the right person on the job?" They can talk to themselves, but then the people in the white lab coats may come around for them. So as I look at myself as a mentor, the major part of the job is to just listen. What I may have dealt with 10 - 20 times in my career, they are dealing with for the first time, and want to discuss it.

ASK: Is there anything in particular you are listening for?

Cameron: I let them talk for 10-15 minutes and at the end of it I say, "Well, let me play back what I heard, and then lets talk about what you want to do." A large percent of the time they just wanted to vent or brainstorm concepts/ideas and to know that other people have experienced similar things. When you say, "Yep, that is pretty typical for projects like this," that generally makes them feel better. Sometimes we will discuss what the person wants to do to solve a problem and other options they may want to consider. Again, I am a resource and mentor who is trying to help the person grow and be successful. I don't see myself as being there to provide answers to their every problem. The last thing I want to do is clone "little Scotts" who can carry out my ideas about project management without thinking.

ASK: You've been at Procter and Gamble about 30 years, right?

Cameron: Actually, 31.

ASK: Okay, 31. What do you regard as the biggest milestone of your career?

Cameron: The biggest milestone was the birth of our triplet daughters Laura, Beth and Caroline--but I guess you mean professionally.

ASK: Yes, I was thinking professionally.

Cameron: I think the answer to the question is probably I haven't done it yet. I'd like to believe the best assignment or challenge is still in front of me. Since the girls are now 10, I figure I've got another 13 years of work to find out if I'm right.

ASK: And if they go on to graduate school, forget it. You may never see retirement.

Cameron: Yeah, but I can live with that.